

The Arts

Orchards from Epstein

Was Lee Harvey Oswald a Soviet Agent?

BY JEFF GOLDBERG

LEGEND: the Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald. By Edward Jay Epstein. 384 pages. New York: Reader's Digest Press/McGraw-Hill. \$12.95.

If Lee Harvey Oswald were to return from the grave, the one book about his life that he would find most amusing would be Edward J. Epstein's *Legend*.

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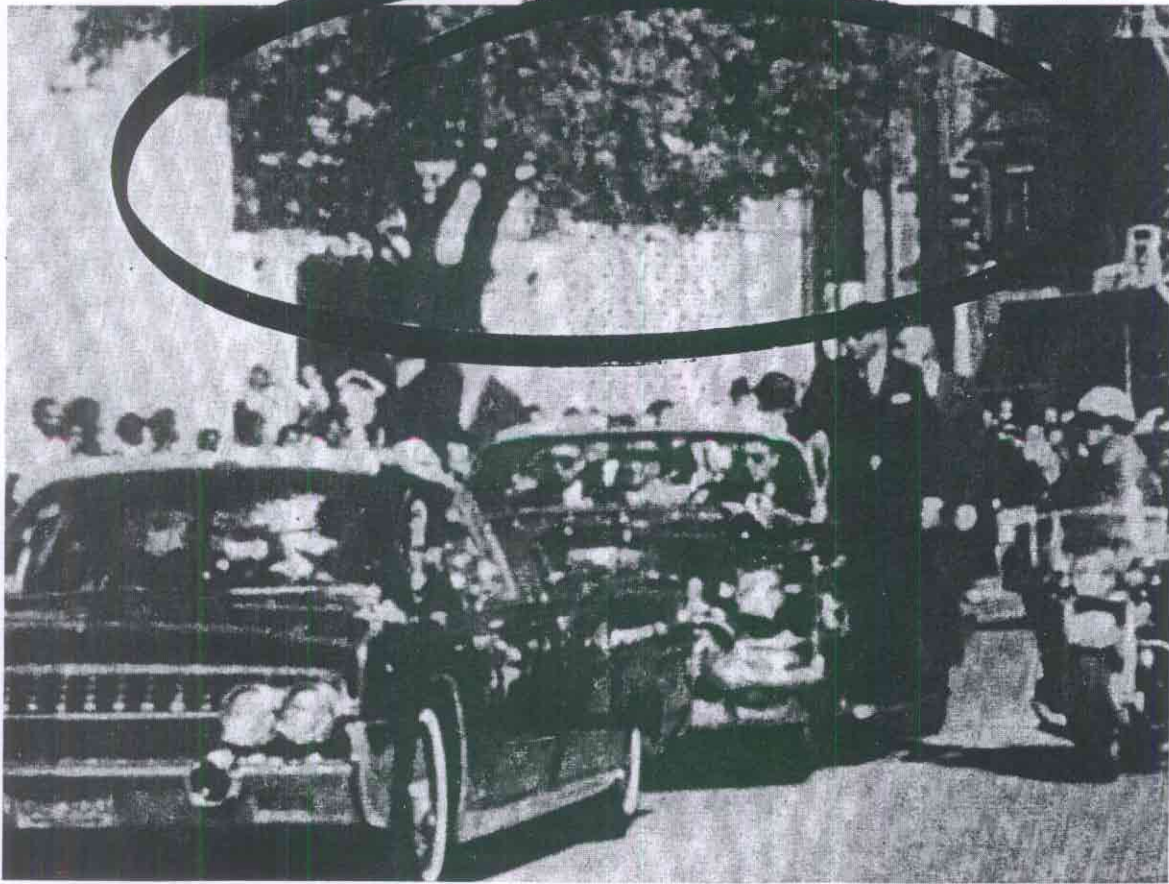
The central question that Epstein asks concerns Oswald's life in the Soviet Union as reconstructed by the Warren Commission and accepted by the Commission as "real." Was this "life" just a false biography fabricated for a secret agent, designed by the KGB to lead us away from his real ties?

Epstein's version of Oswald's life, like a Byzantine spy novel, takes much unraveling before it can be fully understood. Briefly, Epstein says that the KGB recruited Oswald in Japan to steal U-2 secrets, planned his defection to the USSR, somehow mysteriously debriefed him of his

radar knowledge, and then created a legend for him to explain away this intelligence connection. He was then free to return to the US with his Russian wife, Marina, whom Epstein suspects is also a KGB agent who was smuggled into America by marrying the American defector.

After returning from the USSR, Oswald was on his own to pursue his "Marxist ideals." The KGB never planned that he would kill John F. Kennedy. Oswald did that alone, because he was a suicidal nut. But to further cover its tracks after the assassination, the KGB sent "defectors" to the CIA and FBI with disinformation

The oak tree in question.



Abraham Zapruder

to substantiate Oswald's legend and hide his previous KGB ties.

It is this last facet of the legend, the supposed KGB cover-up, that has thus far gotten most attention from the press. A high-level KGB agent, Yuri Nosenko, switched sides in 1964 and defected to the CIA. Epstein tells us that Nosenko was actually a double agent bringing KGB disinformation about Oswald to the Warren Commission. Today, according to Epstein, Nosenko has a new identity and is an accredited CIA case officer.

Epstein's interpretation of the Nosenko story was spoon-fed to him by James Jesus Angleton, the former chief of CIA counterintelligence. Angleton, 60, is an OSS-veteran who grows orchids for a hobby. Suspicious of everyone and everything, he is also a dedicated anti-Communist who, according to *New York* magazine, believes that detente is a trick and the Sino-Soviet split is a ruse to lull NATO to sleep.

In December, 1963, Richard Helms gave Appleton full responsibility for dealing with the Warren Commission investigation. Angleton also oversaw known illegal CIA operations, including "CHAOS", the secret domestic spying program of the 1960s. It was allegedly the public disclosure of CIA mail openings in 1974 that led then-CIA Director William Colby to fire Angleton. Colby and Angleton were longtime rivals. (Aaron Latham's novel, *Orchids For Mother* is a thinly disguised account of their combat.) Colby had tried, unsuccessfully, to transfer Angleton. According to Latham, Colby might have hesitated in wielding the axe because Angleton controlled the secret files on CIA employees, and he feared blackmail.

Angleton, through Epstein, insists he was ousted because of the long-standing "Nosenko controversy." Angleton distrusted Nosenko's story immediately, sensing it was a KGB set-up. He tried hard, using unprecedented interrogation methods, to blow Nosenko's cover, but he failed. Nevertheless, he remains certain of his assessment. No one else in the CIA, FBI, or Warren Commission wanted to face up to KGB penetration. Angleton's message is clear. The KGB has the US intelligence system thoroughly infiltrated. Things are "inside-out." No secrets are safe. Anyone might be a KGB mole. Something must be done to allow the patriotic anti-Communists like Angleton to regain control.

Recently *Time* called Epstein "a careful, academic researcher whose 1966 book, *Inquest*, first revealed flaws in the Warren Commission's investigation." *Legend* might have been an important

DEAD WITNESSES

Time is not on the side of the truth in the Kennedy assassination. Leads grow cold. Witnesses scheduled to appear before the House investigation are dying.

Mobsters Sam (Momo) Giancana, John Roselli, and Charles Nicoletti, the lieutenants in the CIA-Mafia plots against Castro, have all been professionally executed within the last 2½ years. If he tried, Epstein did not get to them in time. But in the course of his research, he interviewed William Sullivan, former top-level FBI executive; Francis Gary Powers, former U-2 pilot; and George DeMohrenschildt, a close friend of Oswald and a suspected intelligence operative. All three died from unusual accidents soon after the Epstein meetings. Epstein has said, "It is tempting to see a connection between these deaths, but I don't. After all, I interviewed over 200 witnesses." Yes, but if one were to rate the relative importance of these 200 people, the top six would probably have included Sullivan, Powers, DeMohrenschildt, Angleton, Helms, and Nosenko. The first three are now dead. The others, top CIA operatives, live on.

new analysis of the JFK assassination, given that *Reader's Digest* supported Epstein to the tune of \$500,000—half of the entire Warren Commission budget. He also took three times as long to reach his conclusions—and his staff of researchers and consultants could draw upon 14 years of digging by other scholars.

But judging from his main sources—the work of the Warren Commission, the books of the Commission's ardent apologists, and former CIA men with axes to grind—his conclusions were predetermined from the start. This time, ignoring his own 1966 book, he began at the same point as the Warren Commission by assuming Oswald was guilty. Epstein has chosen not to notice the body of questions and conflicting evidence which led Congress to reopen the investigation. Nowhere in the book is there a mention of any critic of the Warren Commission.

The book covers a lot of ground superficially, with little or no comment by the author. We are teased with many provocative possibilities. Much is insinuated, but no conclusions are drawn, nor is a plan for future action suggested. This book is here to say the murder is solved. Oswald did it alone. There are no doubts, no other suspects, no credible alternatives.

Epstein recently told an interviewer, "I began by rejecting the idea that there was something new to be found out about bullets, wounds, or the grassy knoll." So he relegates his version of the physical evidence of the assassination to six pages at the rear of the book. It is in this appendix, more than anywhere else in the book, that Epstein tips his hand. He embraces each of the Warren Commission's dubious conclusions, adds his own twists, and in addition is guilty of shoddy research and faulty logic. Here are two of many possible examples. First, by viewing the famous film of the assassination taken by bystander Abraham Zapruder, the Warren Commission postulated that Oswald had 5.6 seconds to fire the three bullets they believed were aimed at JFK. A single sniper, using Oswald's bolt-action rifle, would have been hard-pressed to fire three shots in this time frame. More time would have obviously made the shots easier.

Epstein claims the Warren Commission "made a serious error" in determining the elapsed firing time and attempts to prove that Oswald had seven seconds. He says that an oak tree, which blocked the line of sight between the sixth floor window of the Book Depository and the Presidential limousine, had no leaves that day. The Warren Commission reconstructed the assassination in June, 1964 "when the oak tree blocking the line of sight... was in full bloom. But the assassination occurred on Nov. 22, when the deciduous tree had no foliage."

However, in the photograph taken at the time by AP photographer James Altgens, the oak tree is seen directly behind JFK's limousine, the lead car. It is in full leaf, as were all the trees in Dealey Plaza that day.

Another of Epstein's errors concerns the violent backward movement of JFK's head after the impact of the fatal shot, recorded by Zapruder. (This film is a key piece of evidence, because it strongly suggests multiple gunmen. Epstein refers to it only once, in a footnote to the appendix.) He says the backward head motion was not caused by a front shot (i.e., a conspiracy), because "the car was accelerating." Yet in his narrative, while describing the instant before the fatal shot, he writes, "The limousine came to an almost complete halt." The car can't be accelerating while at a standstill.

How can a \$500,000 researcher fail to look correctly at the basic pictures of the assassination? How are we to accept any of his work given these blunders? Epstein was apparently more infatuated with Angleton than devoted to learning the truth. He has recently, by the way, taken up orchids. □